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SUBJECT: REUNION REFOCUSSES ROK PUBLIC ON ABDUCTEES

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) The emotional June 28-30 reunion between Kim Young-nam, a ROK abduction victim, and his South Korean mother has increased domestic interest in the DPRK's post-Korean War abductions of ROK nationals. Kim is one of a total of 485 South Korean abduction victims believed to be remaining in the North. Despite ROKG efforts to address the abductee issue during official inter-Korean exchanges, little progress has been made because the DPRK continues to deny the existence of South Korean abductees. Recently, the ROK government signaled a slight change in its policy by declaring that the ROKG would provide reciprocal amounts of economic assistance to the North for due progress on the issue. Kim Young-nam's denial of his abduction, however, demonstrates that the DPRK position continues to remain unchanged. Meanwhile, the Grand National Party (GNP) and conservative human rights groups continue to criticize the ROK government for its "quiet" approach. END SUMMARY.

KIM YOUNG-NAM ABDUCTION CASE

¶2. (U) In early June, the DPRK made a surprising announcement to accept the ROK government's request to include Kim Young-nam, a 1978 ROK kidnapping victim, in the 14th round of Separated Family Reunions that was held June 19-30 in North Korea. The case of Kim Young-nam received intense media attention when his relationship with Megumi Yokota, a Japanese abduction victim, was revealed earlier this year. The ROK government believes that Kim Young-nam is one of five high-school students abducted by North Korean agents between the years of 1977 and 1978. Kim, who was 17 years old when he disappeared from a beach near his South Korean hometown of Kunsan, North Jeolla Province in August 1978, now lives and works as an intelligence officer in the North. Kim's emotional reunion with his South Korean mother and sister during the fourth and last session of reunions held at Mt. Geumgang from June 28-30 was the highlight of Korean and Japanese media reports covering the event with the hope of shedding more light on Kim's abduction to the DPRK, as well as his relationship with Megumi Yokota. Kim Young-nam, however, denied his abduction during a June 29 press conference. Kim also distinguished his case from that of other abductees that had participated in the Separated Family Reunions in past rounds by denying that his entry into the North was "voluntary," and went on to explain that he ended up in North Korea after being rescued by a North Korean vessel.

POST-WAR ABDUCTEES

¶3. (U) Kim Young-nam's abduction case has brought renewed attention to North Korea's past kidnappings of South Korean citizens after the Korean War. According to official statistics, a total of 3,790 people have been abducted by the North subsequent to the Korean War. Of these, 3,298 (87 percent) have safely returned to the ROK as a result of negotiations facilitated by the Korean National Red Cross. An additional seven have escaped the North, six of whom are currently living in the South. At present, the ROK government believes 485 post-war abductees remain detained in the DPRK. (NOTE: There is also a significant number of Korean War abductees who were forcibly taken to the North during the Korean War. Estimates range as high as 84,532, though a total of 7,034 people are registered as missing in the 1956 list compiled by the Korean National Red Cross. END NOTE.).

¶4. (U) Post-war abductee cases generally fall into three categories. Approximately 90 percent of abductees are identified as ROK fishermen. Beginning with the first kidnapping incident in 1955, North Korea has abducted a total of 3,692 fishermen, 434 of whom currently remain detained in the North. The last fishing boat abduction incident was in May 1995, when North Korean Coast Guards seized eight fishermen aboard the "No. 86 Woosung-ho." Three of the Woosung-ho crewmen were killed during a violent struggle with their abductors. The rest of the crew was released through Panmunjeom in December 1995.

¶5. (U) A majority of abduction incidents occurred while fishermen were in or near North Korean territorial waters in the West and East Seas. According to the testimony of Lee Jae-geun, an abducted fisherman who escaped to the South in 2000, DPRK officials interrogated the crewmen of abducted fishing boats in sessions that could last up to several months. While screening out possible spies, the North Koreans would pick those who were either physically fit or had a high level of education for "special training"; these individuals would not be released with the rest of the crew at the conclusion of the interrogation process.

¶6. (U) There have also been "special case" abductions involving a Korean Airline plane hijacking incident in 1969, a Navy I-2 boat abduction incident in 1970, and the abduction of two South Korean Coast Guards in 1974. Of the 51 people aboard the Korean Airline flight, 12 people (four crew members, eight passengers) were prevented from returning back to the South. The DPRK has refused to release any of the crewmen on the Navy I-2 boat, as well as the two Coast Guards captured in 1974.

¶7. (U) Finally, there are snatching incidents, such as the case of Kim Young-nam, in which ROK nationals have been grabbed from either ROK territory or abroad and taken to the DPRK. There have been five known cases of ROK nationals being abducted by North Korean secret agents from within South Korea. All of the five victims were high school students kidnapped between the years of 1977 and 1978 by DPRK agents, and all were kidnapped from the beach; none have been repatriated.

¶8. (U) A total of 20 ROK nationals have been abducted in third countries by North Korean agents. Before the normalization of ROK-PRC diplomatic relations in 1992, most of the abductions were carried out in Europe, where North Korean agents had relatively easy access to South Korean citizens studying, working, or traveling in Europe. The most recent cases have all taken place in China, however, as the number of South Koreans traveling to China increased after the normalization of ROK-PRC relations.

¶9. (U) Twelve of the 20 overseas abduction victims currently remain detained in North Korea. The list of detainees include: a former Labor Attach at the ROK Embassy in West Germany (and his family), Lee Jae-hwan (son of former politician Lee Young-wook), and the well-known (and the last

reported DPRK overseas abduction) case of Rev. Kim Dong-shik.

Three of the overseas snatching victims have managed to escape.

INTER-KOREAN NEGOTIATIONS ON THE ABDUCTEE ISSUE

¶10. (U) Since the inter-Korean summit in June 2000, the ROK government has attempted to address the abductee issue during official exchanges (namely inter-Korean Red Cross talks and inter-Korean ministerial talks) with the DPRK. In 2002, the two Koreas agreed to cooperate on confirming the fate and whereabouts of "those reported missing during the Korean War" (i.e., Korean War POWs and abductees) during the 4th Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks, which provided the initial basis for the ROK to officially address the abductee issue during inter-Korean exchanges. In particular, the ROKG has also continued to raise the issue of confirming the fate and whereabouts of "those reported missing after the Korean War" (i.e., post-war abductees) along with "those reported missing during the Korean War" (i.e., Korean War POWs and abductees).

The former category of abductees was not included in an official inter-Korean agreement, however, until recently, when the two sides agreed to cooperate on confirming the fate and whereabouts of "those reported missing during and after the Korean War" at the 7th Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks last February.

¶11. (U) The South Korean government regards these agreements as the DPRK's implicit acknowledgment of the existence of South Korean POWs and abductees in North Korea. In contrast to its admission of having abducted Japanese nationals, however, the DPRK continues to deny that there are South Korean abductees (and POWs) in North Korea.

¶12. (U) The ROKG also recognizes that the DPRK's direct acknowledgment of its past actions regarding the abduction of South Korean nationals would be imperative in bringing about substantive progress on the issue. Accordingly, the South Korean government has recently assumed a stronger stance on resolving the issue by expressing its will to provide reciprocal amounts of economic assistance to the North in return for: (1) confirming the fates and whereabouts of abductees; (2) reunions between abductees and their families; and (3) the repatriation of abductees. At the same time, the ROK has also conveyed the message that it is willing to review the possibility of returning North Korean "long-term prisoners" in the South to the DPRK, if the abductee issue is successfully resolved.

SEPARATED FAMILY REUNIONS

¶13. (U) Meanwhile, Seoul has regularly included abductees (as well as POWs) as candidates for Separated Family Reunions, in order to address the abductee issue under the broader category of "separated families." In the course of 13 rounds of Separated Family Reunions from Nov. 2000 to Feb. 2006, a total of 12 POWs and 12 abductees were able to meet with their families in the South, while the fates and whereabouts of approximately 110 POWs and abductees (includes those that participated in the family reunions) have been confirmed. Abductees participating in the Separated Family Reunions, however, have all denied that they were abducted to the North by repeating statements regarding their "voluntary" entry into the DPRK.

SOUTH KOREAN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC VIEWS ON THE ISSUE

¶14. (U) On the other hand, South Korean political and public reactions regarding the ROKG's efforts to resolve the issue have been mixed. The Grand National Party (GNP), South Korea's main opposition, has been generally critical of the government's "quiet" approach on addressing the issue, and has continually called on the ROK government to assume a more assertive position in its dealings with the North on the issue. The position of North Korean human rights

organizations has been mostly consistent with that of the GNP. For example, Han Ki-hong of NKNet recently told poloff that the ROKG could not continue to take "lukewarm approaches" to resolving the issue of ROK POWs and abductees.

At the same time, abductee family organizations (that will be the direct beneficiaries of any positive developments on the issue) have been supportive of the ROKG's efforts to arrange reunions for abduction victims and their families (and confirm the fates and whereabouts of victims) during Separated Family Reunions.

COMMENT

¶15. (SBU) The Roh Moo-hyun administration is under intense political pressure to account for the fate of some 485 abductees. For many South Koreans, such an accounting is the reciprocal side of extending economic assistance to North Korea. So far at least, the ROKG has been held back, concerned that pushing the issue too aggressively would set back the inter-Korean engagement process. South Korean public pressure is not, however, likely to die soon. Kim Young-nam's improbable denial of his abduction has only renewed public awareness of North Korea's past kidnappings of ROK citizens and will prompt further calls for the ROKG to redress this matter. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW